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ABSTRACT

A sample of 100 first graders participated in a study of the relationship between three types of spacing used in written sentences for segmenting word boundaries and pupil errors in completing word-boundary tasks. The results indicated that eliminating printer's word boundaries in written sentences had a significant effect on first graders' performance. In this investigation, there were more total errors on sentences with no boundaries between words. The second most frequent number of errors occurred for sentences with a boundary after every other letter. The fewest number of errors occurred for sentences with printer's word boundaries. Major types of errors associated with word-boundary tasks are also discussed. (AA)

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by

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Introduction:

Researchers have been studying word boundaries for several years. Reid (1966), Clay (1968), and Downing (1970, 1971, 1973) have pointed out that beginners in Scottish, English, and New Zealand schools are confused as to the meaning of such terms as "letter," "word," "number," "sound," and "name." They seemed not to understand that virtually all communication, whether oral or written, is delivered in words.

Karpova (1955) found that Russian children had difficulty in dividing printed sentences into words. Meltzer and Herse (1968) found that American first-graders had a similar difficulty, and went on to describe a sequence of beliefs about printed words. They thought that such a sequence was a description of the growth and development of children's concepts about words. Although Kingston, Weaver, and Figa (1972) failed to find support for the developmental sequence of Meltzer and Herse, Figa (1972) found that dividing normally-spaced printed sentences into words was easier than dividing non-spaced sentences into the various words of which they were composed. McNinch (1974) found performance on word-boundary tasks to be related to reading readiness and Mickish (1974) found word-boundary knowledge to be related to reading level among first-graders.

The Problem:

The available evidence suggests that children's knowledge of the boundaries between printed words and/or between spoken words is directly related to their success in beginning to learn to read. However, only the research of Figa (1972) deals with children's ability to divide sentences into their component words when the ordinary spacing is used and when no extra white space is allowed to separate letters into word units. The purpose of the research reported herein is to determine differences in performance on three word boundary tasks administered to first graders.

Procedure:

Two tasks were similar to the tasks administered by Figa. The first (pre-primer level) sentence was typed without spaces between words and then was typed again with a single space between each pair of words. The third task was to separate this same sentence into its separate words when the sentence was typed with a space between every pair of letters and no extra space between words. The same three versions of a second sentence (primer level) were also prepared.

One hundred end-of-year first-graders were selected from the Douglas County Schools, Douglasville, Georgia. The group represented a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and was believed to include a normal distribution of intelligence and reading achievement (although neither was tested). The teachers of these children administered the three versions of each of the two sentences to their classes at one sitting.

Results and Conclusions:

The purpose of this experiment was to determine the relationship between the three types of spaces used in written sentences for segmenting word

boundaries and pupil errors in completing word boundary tasks. The results indicated that the eliminating of the printer's word boundary in written sentences had a significant effect on first graders' performance on word boundary tasks. Of the three types of spacing used in the sentences during the investigation, there were overwhelmingly more total errors on sentences with no boundaries between the words. The second most frequent number of total errors were made on the sentences with a boundary after every letter. When completing a word boundary task, the fewest number of total errors were made using the sentences with printer's word boundaries. Therefore, based on the above results, it can be concluded that the absence of word boundaries in the sentences resulted in a significant increase in the number of errors committed by the first graders as they segmented words in word boundary tasks.

It is interesting to note that differences in performance on the tasks occurred from class to class. Moreover, a general analysis of the types of responses made by the subjects revealed several major categories of errors. The errors seemed to fall into the following categories: errors before or after tall letters, the most frequently made error, errors on long words, the second most frequent error, errors before or after the letter "e," errors on compound words, the combining of two words, and the tendency to equate words and letters. There was no indication that the pupils had less difficulty correctly identifying nouns as suggested by Holden and MacGinitie (1972).

In summary, the results of this study lead to several conclusions:

1. The printer's word boundary space may be an important aid for the accurate performance of word boundary tasks.
2. There may be a pattern of the type of errors pupils make on word boundary tasks.
3. Differences in performance on word boundary tasks may be related to classroom experience.

ERRORS ON WORD BOUNDARY TASKS

Classroom	Type of Error*	Sentence Type: No Boundaries	Usual Boundaries	Boundaries Between Letters
1	a	24	2	9
	b	0	0	0
	c	16	0	8
	d	5	0	5
	e	0	0	3
	f	2	0	0
2	a	32	5	17
	b	3	2	3
	c	16	5	12
	d	2	0	7
	e	0	0	2
	f	3	0	0
3	a	22	10	13
	b	6	5	7
	c	12	10	10
	d	9	0	6
	e	0	0	5
	f	11	0	3
4	a	16	7	10
	b	3	3	4
	c	8	7	4
	d	1	0	1
	e	1	0	0
	f	6	1	2

* a-Errors before or after tall letters. b-Equate words and letters. c-Errors on long words. d-Errors before or after "e." e-Errors on compound words. f-Combined two words.

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